

Science faces sequestration cuts

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Fewer grants and less research money means fewer folks looking for cures to cancer, Alzheimer's and other ailments, says research chief Francis Collins, with the federal budget "sequester" ahead.



(Photo: National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases)

Story Highlights

- National Institutes of Health is facing \$1.6 billion in cuts
- Move could force drop in grants to basic medical research
- Impact could hurt the next generation of scientists

Cancer, Alzheimer's and many other diseases will face the prospect of fewer researchers working on cures as a result of the upcoming federal budget sequestration, National Institutes of Health chief Francis Collins said Monday. Already in the news for planned cutbacks in warships patrolling the Persian Gulf and air traffic controllers watching the skies, the March 1 federal budget sequester means across-the-board spending cuts totaling \$85 billion spread

across federal agencies. The sequestration's \$1.6 billion cut to NIH, the world's leading medical grant agency, translates into a 5.1% cut to medical research, hurting new research grants in particular.

"I worry desperately this means we will lose a generation of young scientists," Collins says. With the budget of the \$31 billion agency holding steady over the last half-decade, the chances of research grants being funded had already fallen to roughly 1 in 6, half of its historic rate. The cuts will lower those chances even more, Collins says. "A lot of good science just won't be done."

Because of the 2011 budget act that created the sequestration, a bludgeon intended to compel a federal budget deal between Congress and the Obama administration, the costs of the cuts must be spread evenly across NIH centers, ranging from the National Cancer Institute to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research.

"Sequestration is an idiotic thing," says Stefano Bertuzzi, head of the American Society for Cell Biology in Bethesda, Md. "How can we attract and grow the next generation of scientists if basic research is a career fraught with instability and subject to random and draconian cuts?"

In December, NIH cut 10% off its existing medical research grant amounts, which support some 430,000 technical jobs nationwide, because of a congressional decision to delay a 2013 budget until the end of March. The sequester effects kicking in means that cut will likely become permanent, Collins says, with the end of March threatening a full government shutdown, the subject of much debate in Washington.

"The sequester is going to be a huge mess for basic research, but I'm not sure if folks really appreciate what this means for the average Joe academic scientists," says biologist Brad Schuster of New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, who studies how cells divide to reproduce. Even a delay in getting a grant means lights out for most labs, Schuster says, as universities only rarely make up for shortfalls. "There are no furloughs in academic science. If funding runs out, that's it, everyone's out on the street."

Even at NIH's own campus hospital, the sequestration will mean that sick people will be turned away from experimental treatments, Collins says. "Those hospital beds for clinical trials cost money, sadly."

"If you think research is expensive, try disease!," Bertuzzi says, quoting research advocate Mary Lasker, who led early efforts for the American Cancer Society. "Without research we are robbed of our future and flattened into the present. Is this what we want?"